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“Simply a Living Wonder”: Black Identity Through the Swiss Lens in the Works of Baldwin, Carter, and Cole

This paper examines the use of Switzerland as a literary space in African American writing to challenge conventional notions of Americanness and explore questions of identity. Specifically, this study will focus on three examples of Black writing that reflect on American issues through the Swiss lens: James Baldwin’s essay “Stranger in the Village” (1953), Vincent O. Carter’s *The Bern Book* (1973), and Teju Cole’s essay “Black Body” (2014). While the first two texts are set in 1950s Switzerland, Cole’s essay is contemporary, creating a contrast which allows us to trace the evolution of the African American gaze on Switzerland. In fact, while Baldwin and Carter use the inversion of the ethnographic gaze at the Other as the dominant narrative technique, Cole, whose essay on Leukerbad is modeled on Baldwin’s, depicts a reality that has moved past the historical anxieties of his ‘ancestors.’ This paper aims to understand how Black representations of the Swiss changed and how Switzerland can function as a mirror to better understand the United States, its identity, and its complex racial culture. Lastly, it will establish how the chosen authors and texts contributed to building a usable past for the African American community and how this past reverberates today.

Keywords: Black identity; Switzerland; James Baldwin; Teju Cole;
Vincent Carter

In the summer of 1924, almost exactly a hundred years ago, two African American writers were born just about a month apart. James Baldwin came into this world in Harlem and he would go on to become one of the most accomplished and politically prophetic Black writers of his time. Vincent Carter was born in Kansas City, Missouri, and, after a lifetime of neglect, his work has recently resurfaced in the attempt to diversify Switzerland’s predominantly white literary history. In this essay I will

read Baldwin and Carter alongside a third writer, the contemporary Nigerian American Teju Cole. In doing so, I would like to establish how Baldwin and Carter used Switzerland as a literary space for inward reflection and how Cole, by contrast, uses these ‘futures past’ to trace the evolution of the African American gaze on Europe in the decolonized present. Reading Cole’s recent essay, “Black Body,” I will show how authors such as Baldwin and Carter were instrumental in creating a usable past, or a cultural inheritance that grants Cole an identity of universal access. Lastly, I will argue that Switzerland, the common denominator for these three authors, represents more than a mere “geographical coincidence” (McCarthy, *The Blue Period* 70). Looking at Baldwin, Carter and Cole’s writing, what emerges is that Switzerland’s “in-betweenness” (Cole, “Far Away”) amplifies Black otherness, leading the authors to a confrontation with their own inner world that deeply empowers their subjectivity.

Strangers in the Village

James Baldwin and Vincent Carter first came to Europe in the 1940s under very different circumstances. Baldwin settled in Paris in 1948, because he genuinely believed that in New York “he would have died young” (Hermann and Stauffer, my translation). Carter first set foot in Europe as a soldier during World War II, where he participated in the Normandy Landings and the consequent liberation of Paris. By the early 1950s they were both living in Switzerland. Baldwin did so only temporarily, going on several writing retreats in the mountain village of Leukerbad that culminated in the catalytic essay “A Stranger in the Village,” published by *Harper’s Magazine* in 1953. Carter, on the other hand, relocated permanently, spending the next thirty years of his life in Bern, where he died in 1983. Between 1953 and 1957 Carter wrote *The Bern Book*, a nearly three-hundred-page text that lies at the crossroads between travel writing and autobiography. The book would only see publication in 1973, nearly twenty years after its completion.

Reading *The Bern Book* and “Stranger in the Village” side by side, the similarity of racially abusive behavior the authors have to endure is disquieting. In the Swiss environment that Baldwin describes as “white snow, white mountains and white faces” (*Conversations* 4), these authors are “high-contrast” figures (McCarthy, Preface xiii), rendered hyper-visible by their societal and racial surroundings. The result is a behavioral pattern that leaves Carter “paralyzed with surprise,” for instance, upon

realizing that a “gentleman was stroking my hair with absorbed concentration and with a look of wonderment upon his face” (326). Baldwin similarly observes a villager “gingerly put his fingers on my hair, as though he were afraid of an electric shock” (“Stranger” 119). Both authors are a ‘sight’ amongst the Swiss, so much so that Carter, who mockingly employs Victorian-style chapter headings in *The Bern Book*, titles chapter 15 “EVERYBODY, Men, Women, Children, Dogs, Cats, and Other Animals, Wild and Domestic, Looked at Me – ALL the Time” (90, capitalization in original). This behavior, which today would be designated as microaggressions or hate crimes, culminates in the recurrent use of what Carter calls the “terrible sound” and namely the German N-word (69). Regarding the use of the N-word, Baldwin says of the villagers that “they have no way of knowing the echoes this sound raises in me” (“Stranger” 119).

The use of the N-word in German-speaking countries in the 1950s was a well-established practice. As early as the late nineteenth century there were instances of racial othering, such as “the song ‘Zehn kleine Negerlein’ (‘Ten Little Negroes’), [...] the children’s call *Neger, Neger, Schornsteinfeger* (‘Negro, Negro, Chimney Sweep’), and chocolates such as *Negerkiisse* (‘Negro Kisses’)” (Mehring 142). Simon Dickel points out that this use of the N-word¹ “strongly resonates with a colonialist mindset that regards Black people as intellectually inferior to whites” (122). This is where a clear contrast emerges between the Swiss self-perception as a colonial outsider that bears no relation to colonial subjugation or racism, and the country’s historical reality of complicity and self-interest that Swiss historians have only recently started to address. Patricia Purtschert and colleagues call this carefully crafted depiction of innocence “colonialism without colonies” to emphasize how Switzerland was “highly involved in and affected by colonialism without having developed a respective self-conceptualization” (287). Baldwin and Carter bear witness to a number of these symptoms of the colonial condition during their time in Switzerland. When Carter denounces the racial prejudice of Swiss landlords a friend tells him “No, it isn’t that... It’s just that people have never had an experience with a Black man. They think Africans are dangerous” (88). Similarly, Baldwin is shocked by the practice of ‘purchasing’ Black Africans to finance their conversion to Christianity and he de-

¹ In the Swiss canton of Glarus, while attending the sermon of a lady pastor in a protestant church, the American writer Herbert Kubly notes that “the repeated word ‘Neger,’ sounding so much like the colloquialism ‘Nigger,’ rang harshly in my ears” (82).

clares that the villagers will never believe that he comes from New York, because “black men come from Africa” (“Stranger” 118).

Baldwin’s account of Leukerbad frames this colonial innocence as the consequence of the remoteness of the small village and the provincialism of its inhabitants. Baldwin tells us, magnanimously but perhaps also a bit disingenuously, that their racist attitudes come with the “charm of genuine wonder” and “no element of intentional unkindness” (“Stranger” 119). The reader also gives the villagers the benefit of the doubt because they are, for the most part, uneducated and isolated people, whose most eventful travels are the occasional visits “to another town at the foot of the mountain” (121). In Bern, Carter unconsciously shares Baldwin’s experience, thereby revealing a central point of analysis. Carter’s account shows that the Swiss capital, a cosmopolitan city of some two hundred thousand inhabitants in the 1950s, is just as racialized a space as the six-hundred people alpine village. All of Switzerland, it seems, is stuck in an “old world” where the “premodern past is still very much part of the present” (Zocco 125) and where there is no space for Baldwin and Carter to be encountered as humans. They are strangers with none of their individuality recognized, or in Baldwin’s words, “simply a living wonder” (“Stranger” 118).

While Baldwin’s essay is perhaps the most emblematic in constructing a temporally frozen image of Switzerland, the village of Leukerbad becomes a symbol for all of Europe’s premodern racial innocence. Although the inhabitants of the alpine village may be unaware of their historical position, they are not outside of history. “People are trapped in history, and history is trapped in them,” Baldwin writes as he contrasts their perceived innocence with his own awareness as an African American whose body carries the weight of modernity’s crimes (“Stranger” 119). Carter’s memoir, as we shall see, is more introspective and portrays Switzerland as a place untouched by the turbulence of the modern world. Much like Baldwin in Leukerbad, Carter feels visible but never quite legible in Bern, and his presence seems to disrupt the illusion of timelessness that the Swiss have built for themselves. Carter’s depiction of modernity is existential: He is a modern subject exiled to a place that does not recognize the historical weight he carries. Cole, revisiting Baldwin’s essay through the lens of twenty-first-century Black experience, notes that the deeper racial structures that Baldwin identified still survive and that underneath the modern surface of technology and infrastructure lies a deep undercurrent of historical amnesia. Cole’s contemporary voice, however, emphasizes continuity rather than rupture as he identifies the problem not in the ig-

norance of the villagers alone (as Baldwin once did) but in the deeper systemic refusal to integrate the past into the present.

Reversing Authority

Both Baldwin's essay and Carter's book are *reactions* to the acts of primitive discrimination they encounter in Switzerland and attempts to redirect the oppressive white gaze that is cast upon them. In Carter's words, “[t]hey want to observe me, I thought. And my attitude was, Well, let them. And while they're observing me I can also take a few notes” (127). Baldwin and Carter use the same rhetorical technique in order to subvert the dynamics of authority in the Swiss context of racial hyper-visibility. McCarthy defines it as “inverting the racial authority of the ethnographic gaze” (Preface xi). This ironic reversal casts the Black author into the dominating position of a “colonial-style ethnographer” (Zocco 123), flipping the relation of power to the detriment of the self-appointed Swiss. For Baldwin, finding himself in a remote area of the Swiss Alps, the easiest way to do this is through a list of absences.

In the village there is no movie house, no bank, no library, no theatre; very few radios, one jeep, one station wagon; and, at the moment, one typewriter, mine, an invention which the woman next door to me here had never seen. (“Stranger” 117)

As a city man, Baldwin emphasizes the provincialism of Leukerbad, but more importantly elevates himself above the local community from an intellectual standpoint, stressing how the cultural medium of the typewriter, ubiquitous at the time in America, is an obscure contraption in the village and one uniquely in his possession.

This is where Carter and Baldwin part ways. Carter, who has considerably more time and pages at his disposal, produces a text that blends the subjective perspective of a travel narrative and the analytical rigor of ethnographic research, delving into different Swiss cultural aspects ranging from food and transportation all the way to the perception of women as a political “nonentity” (271). In contrast to Baldwin's tragic-prophetic tone, Carter's reversal of authority is sublimated through irony and leads to a more individualistic development of racial consciousness. In fact, while Baldwin instrumentalizes Switzerland to reflect on America's own racial dynamics, Carter's resolution is surprisingly apolitical, as his voyage of introspection leads him to “transcend race” altogether (Morrison-Reed

467). In one of the first conversations in the book, Carter's interlocutor proceeds to pose him the "hated question": "But why did you come to Bern anyhow?", to which Carter responds,

Oh, I've come to study the decadence of European culture. Look at that! Have you ever seen anything like that? A grown man drinking beer with a straw!... I've heard that Switzerland is one of the most primitive countries in Europe, where the cultural level of the people is the lowest possible and unthinkably decadent. (59–60)

The Bern Book alternates between these humorous depictions of the Swiss and moments of real melancholy that Carter experiences. The Swiss are "as prejudiced as hell," he writes, and their genteel racism, albeit different from the one back in the United States, produces the exact same result: isolation (129). Another way in which Carter reverses the authority of the Swiss is by appropriating their culture and Western culture at large, as he knowledgeably references not only Swiss authors and painters such as Durrenmatt, Gottfeld, and Hodler, but also all kinds of American and European artists. However, Carter never really transcends the specifically Swiss dimension of his story and by the end of the book he enters restaurants "without flickering an eyelid" at the sound of the N-word, convinced that race is but another "illusion" from which the ego must free itself (322; 339).

Baldwin and Carter's reversals of authority, apart from being early examples of "provincializing Europe from the inside" (Zocco 123), are powerful reappropriations of Black identity. During slavery, in fact, white plantation owners forcibly asserted control over the Black gaze and slaves could be brutally punished merely for looking at white people. These "looking relations" (hooks 340) persisted long after the official abolition of slavery as a way to ensure the survival of institutionalized white supremacy. In the twilight of the Jim Crow Era, "safety," for the Black population, still "resided in the pretense of invisibility" (hooks 340), rendering Baldwin and Carter's representations of Swiss communities all the more empowering, as they originated from a position of hypervisibility. These representations also show how in the 1950s whiteness could still exist without any knowledge of Blackness and that countries such as Switzerland could be involved in denying Black subjectivity even from a position of self-proclaimed innocence. Baldwin writes the following: "I [...] find myself among a people whose culture controls me [...] who yet do not even know of my existence" (120). At a time where the Black body

was not guaranteed a perspective on the world, “to look directly was an assertion of subjectivity, equality” (hooks 340).

A New Privilege of Cultural Inheritance

In 2014, some sixty years after Baldwin’s essay on Leukerbad was published, the Nigerian American writer and photographer Teju Cole followed in his footsteps, visiting the same alpine village. In “Black Body,” Cole narrates how Leukerbad has now succumbed to global capitalism and is packed with tourists and luxury shops. “They’ve seen blacks now,” he writes, “I wasn’t a remarkable sight” (13). There are still occasional ‘glances’ but the essay insinuates that the cultural and political movements of the intervening decades have provided Cole with a social liberty previously unimaginable. Baldwin was notoriously alienated and tormented by his lack of an accepted Black cultural heritage, often referring to himself as “a bastard of the West” (*Notes* 4). In “A Stranger in the Village” he makes the claim that the inhabitants of Leukerbad, though intellectually inferior to him, enjoy by birthright a filial connection to the white European canon of artists and their masterpieces:

These people cannot be, from the point of view of power, strangers anywhere in the world; they have made the modern world, in effect, even if they do not know it. The most illiterate among them is related, in a way that I am not, to Dante, Shakespeare, Michelangelo, Aeschylus, Da Vinci, Rembrandt, and Racine; the cathedral at Chartres says something to them which it cannot say to me, as indeed would New York’s Empire State Building, should anyone here ever see it. Out of their hymns and dances come Beethoven and Bach. Go back a few centuries and they are in their full glory – but I am in Africa, watching the conquerors arrive. (118)

Because Baldwin cannot claim this same European cultural inheritance and because he “cannot trace his lineage back to Africa either, he feels homeless in every sense: physically, culturally and spiritually” (Gehlawat 53). Carter also claims that white people “have the world” (134), but interestingly refuses to transpose this perceived cultural inferiority into a sense of personal inadequacy and, unlike Baldwin, does not want to accept that he is shut out of Western culture. When his Bernese friend outlines his conviction that a Black artist could never perform Bach as gracefully as a white artist, Carter replies that to impose cultural limitations on the basis of race constitutes “intellectual prejudice” (163). “Bach belongs

to the world," he says, and "any true and trained sensibility can interpret Bach" (163).

In his novel, *Open City* (2011), Teju Cole echoes Carter's "provocatively universalist perspective" (Zocco 138). The protagonist of the story, Julius, a young Nigerian doctor, finds himself at a Mahler concert at Carnegie Hall. He describes the space as being dominated by white faces that stare him down as if he were "the only thing odd" (251). "But Mahler's music is not white, or black, not old or young," Cole concludes, "and whether it is even specifically human, rather than in accord with more universal vibrations, is open to question" (252). Furthermore, just as Carter 'owns' European culture by proving himself an avid reader and connoisseur of its artists, Julius appropriates a space from which he still perceives himself excluded through an interior monologue where he displays minute knowledge not only of Mahler, whom he quotes in the original German, but of the entire classical tradition. However, although Carter's post-racial and progressive mindset distances him from Baldwin's tormented search for a workable cultural heritage, both writers, consciously or unconsciously, recognize Western high culture as "their central intellectual benchmark" (Zocco 127). This changes with Cole, who in "Black Body" writes,

There's no world in which I would surrender the intimidating beauty of Yoruba-language poetry for, say, Shakespeare's sonnets, nor one in which I'd prefer the chamber orchestras of Brandenburg to the koras of Mali. *I'm happy to own all of it.* (16, emphasis added)

Cole is able to claim this cultural authority partially due to the "gift of time" (16). Baldwin's list of white European masters of the arts is now rivaled by an "all-star team" of Black achievers: Miles Davis, Ella Fitzgerald, Toni Morrison, Bob Marley, Audre Lorde, and several others, including James Baldwin himself (15). In the mountain village of Leukerbad, after running a hot bath and reading an old paperback edition of Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), Cole experiences a "body-double moment" (12). By retracing Baldwin's steps in Switzerland, "the ancestor" has "briefly taken possession of the descendant" (12), allowing for "a moment of identification" and "in the days that followed that moment guided me" (16).

To appreciate how Cole constructs a meaningful relationship with the past, it is helpful to examine his photography book about Switzerland, *Fernweh* (2020). Much like Baldwin and Carter, in the book Cole also reverses the gaze on Switzerland, but he does so through the visual lan-

guage of photography. The title of the book, *Fernweh*, translates to ‘a longing to be elsewhere’ and refers to the human instinct to leave known circumstances and embrace the unfamiliar. *Fernweh* is thus indicative of the desire to look beyond the surface, beyond appearances and to examine what lies beneath the polished image of Switzerland. In the book Cole shifts away from an idealized depiction of Switzerland and the Alps, stripping the country of its commanding authority and drawing attention to the often overlooked facets of Swiss culture and landscape. Through Cole’s lens the romanticized depictions of Swiss mountains and tidy cities make way for more intimate moments that are largely devoid of human presence and capture the complexity of the country’s identity.²

As a Nigerian American storyteller who frequently integrates photography with writing, Cole invites a more nuanced experience of Switzerland, subverting the typically imposing objectivity with which Western photographers often document other cultures.³ He argues that

To photograph Switzerland is to re-photograph it. But in remaking the photographic image from a contemporary territory, something shifts: the image has been corrupted by knowledge. Its eyes are open. [...] This knowledge is not antic or self-conscious. It manifests, instead, as an unsettling mixture of serenity and melancholy. (*Fernweh*)

Cole suggests that when photographing a place like Switzerland, we never capture a pristine, unaltered image. The “knowledge” accumulated over time, be it historical, personal or cultural, inevitably alters the way we perceive and represent that place. By extension, Cole’s identity as a contemporary subject with access to historical knowledge informs how he engages and reinterprets the world. The act of re-photographing becomes a metaphor for how knowledge and history continually shape identity in the present, offering new perspectives on the development of consciousness over time. In 1965, James Baldwin wrote that

History, as nearly no one seems to know, is not merely something to be read. And it does not refer, merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it

² A number of photographs from the book are featured in Cole’s article “Far Away from Here,” written for *The New York Times Magazine* in 2015.

³ An additional layer of complexity in this reversal of the gaze is added by the fact that Cole is both an outsider to Switzerland and yet not completely ‘outside’ the Western gaze; his perspective challenges the assumptions that typically come with being inside or outside Western narratives.

within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is *literally* present in all that we do. ("White Man's Guilt" 47)

Through Baldwin's experience in Switzerland and his literary recollections, Cole is able to produce what Mikhail Bakhtin calls a 're-accentuation' of the past. Great works of literature, Bakhtin argues, are "capable of uncovering in each era and against ever new dialogizing backgrounds ever newer aspects of meaning" (421). Cole, who is "intrigued by the continuity of places" (*Blind Spot* 279), uses Switzerland to draw a timeline and illustrate how today his relationship to the world is different and not as narrowly defined by the geographic and historical limitations that Baldwin faced. As he roams the streets of Switzerland by himself, Cole is guaranteed a privilege of cultural inheritance that Baldwin and Carter lacked; he does not feel their same oppressive sense of alienation and his subjectivity benefits from universal access to all art, both Western and non-Western. However, Cole's observation that today Black identity is shaped by a more global awareness is marked by poignant ambivalence. Baldwin concludes "Stranger in the Village" by declaring that "the world is white no longer, and it will never be white again" (119). Yet, in the present day, Cole witnesses Black American life still being "disposable from the point of view of policing, sentencing, economic policy, and countless terrifying forms of disregard" (20). While racial dynamics are shifting and Black identity benefits from a larger diasporic network, America has developed an "impressive camouflage" (20) where the underlying structures of racial discrimination still manage to survive.

Switzerland's "In-Betweenness" and the Black Man's "Double Consciousness"

Baldwin, Carter and Cole all use introspection to gain a vantage point from which to reflect back on the United States or their own condition as African Americans. Switzerland is the setting of these self-journeys, where *self* indicates "an inward orientation" and *journey* "a movement outward" (McCarthy, *The Blue Period* 24). Carter frames it as follows:

One, if he wishes to write, has to gain perspective, a distance from which to look at his country, his countrymen and himself. [...] I've come to Switzerland in order to establish in my own mind my identity as an American and as a black man in the western world. (60)

But why Switzerland specifically? A possible answer may be found in what Yves Fricker calls the “particular nature of Switzerland’s presence in the world” (111). Cole celebrates this peculiar position, noting that “Switzerland is in-between but not average, a periphery in a central location, in this world but not of it” (Cole, “Far Away”). This in-betweenness is symbolized in a number of ways: Switzerland lies at the center of Europe, yet maintains itself in cultural and political isolation; it has historically remained neutral but is complicit in the legacies of colonialism; and it sees itself as a distinct, even exceptional experiment, when like many other nations it is linguistically and culturally hybrid. In a not so different way, Black identity is also characterized by a complex feeling of “two-ness,” or what W. E. B. Du Bois calls “double-consciousness.” Black people have had to navigate their identity through the double perspective of their own sense of self and how they are perceived by dominant white society. This shared conflict of perceptions makes Switzerland strangely relatable in the eyes of these three Black authors. The paradoxical insularity of this landlocked country is reflected in its perceived detachment from the complexities of racial and colonial ideologies. This creates a setting where Switzerland feels both connected with and isolated from the world, amplifying the sense of otherness that Black individuals experience there. The appeal of Switzerland, Cole notes, is “all in the awayness of it, the estrangement that one could count on. [...] I was most at home in Switzerland precisely because I wasn’t” (Cole, “Far Away”).

Switzerland’s geopolitical liminality mirrors the Black American condition that Langston Hughes defines as being simultaneously part of and distanced from mainstream society. In his 1926 essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” Hughes dissects this internal conflict within the Black artistic community by narrating the anecdote of a promising young Black poet:

[He] said to me once, ‘I want to be a poet – not a Negro poet,’ meaning, I believe, ‘I want to write like a white poet’; meaning subconsciously, ‘I would like to be a white poet’; meaning behind that, ‘I would like to be white.’ And I was sorry the young man said that, for no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself. (1)

According to Hughes, while aspiring to free themselves of the racial constraints that define them as ‘Other,’ Black artists have succumbed to the “desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization” (1). The recurring aspiration of the Black community to assimilate into white culture, wanting to be accepted into the dominant narrative

while simultaneously being denied full access to it, is a theme also echoed by LeRoi Jones. In his 1963 essay, “The myth of a ‘negro literature’,” he notes that for a long time even “the cultivated Negro [...] looked at literature merely as another way of gaining prestige in the white world,” thus emulating the “literary and artistic models [...] that could be socially acceptable to the white middle class” (108). According to Jones, instead of limiting themselves to “the most spiritually debilitated imitations of literature available” (108), Black artists should embrace their position of in-betweenness – or what Jones calls no-man’s-land – as, while this is a place of struggle, it can also act as a place of profound strength where one can develop an independent voice:

There was always a border beyond which the Negro could not go, whether musically or socially. There was always a possible limitation to any dilution or excess of cultural or spiritual reference. The Negro could not ever become white and that was his strength; at some point, always, he could not participate in the dominant tenor of the white man’s culture, yet he came to understand that culture as well as the white man. It was at this juncture that he had to make use of other resources, whether African, subcultural, or hermetic. And it was this boundary, this no-man’s-land, that provided the logic and beauty of his music. And this is the only way for the Negro artist to provide his version of America – from that no man’s-land outside the mainstream. A no-man’s-land, a black country, completely invisible to white America, but so essentially part of it as to stain its whole being an ominous gray. (114)

Black artists, as Hughes and Jones articulate, must navigate a complex position between two contradictory spheres: one in which their identity is marginalized or erased by a dominant culture that seeks to define them on its own terms, and another in which they are denied full acceptance due to the very traits that make them distinct. This in-betweenness creates a unique liminal space, where their cultural expression is shaped by both resistance to and negotiation with the forces of mainstream white society. This hybridity is a space in its own right and one that holds considerable generative potential precisely because no one is looking there. A complementary perspective is offered by the number of African American texts (mostly Baldwin’s) that emphasize the importance of place and the advantages of spatial indeterminacy: *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961), *No Name in the Street* (1972), *Invisible Man* (Ralph Ellison, 1952). When circling back to Switzerland it becomes increasingly clear that the Alpine country’s neutral stance as both part of Europe and outside its political or military systems, also makes it a place that must “make use of other re-

sources” to maintain its position in global affairs. The creative beauty and cultural richness that Hughes associates with the “no-man’s-land” of Black identity can be paralleled with Switzerland’s ability to preserve its sovereignty and unique international role despite its marginalization from the dominant European socio-political structures.

While in Switzerland, Carter and Baldwin are both aggressively racialized through a behavior that the Swiss regard as a naive and innocent interest in the Other. They are racially hyper-visible but socially invisible; they are seen and unseen at the same time. Switzerland’s in-betweenness therefore extends to their racial identity, enhancing their understanding of the racial dynamics they were born into and the way society ‘sees’ Blackness without fully engaging with it. In Switzerland, Baldwin was able to reflect on his own estrangement with new clarity and experience a powerful reconnection to his childhood home, Harlem.

That winter in Switzerland, I was working on my first novel – I thought I would never be able to finish it – and I finally realized that one of the reasons that I couldn’t finish this novel was that I was ashamed of where I came from and where I had been. I was ashamed of the life in the Negro church, ashamed of my father, ashamed of the Blues, ashamed of the Jazz, and, of course, ashamed of watermelon: all of these stereotypes that the country inflicts on Negroes, that we all eat watermelon or we all do nothing but sing the Blues. Well, I was afraid of all that; and I ran from it. When I say I was trying to dig back to the way I myself must have spoken when I was little, I realized that I had acquired so many affectations, had told myself so many lies, that I really had buried myself beneath a whole fantastic image of myself which wasn’t mine, but white people’s image of me. I realized that I had not always talked [...] the way I had forced myself to learn how to talk. I had to find out what I had been like in the beginning, in order, just technically as a writer, to re-create Negro speech. I realized it was a cadence; it was not a question of dropping s’s or n’s or g’s, but a question of the beat. Bessie had the beat. In that icy wilderness, as far removed from Harlem as anything you can imagine, with Bessie Smith and me... I began. (*Conversations* 4)

As the passage shows, Switzerland magnifies the socio-historical forces that shape white supremacy, reinforcing Baldwin’s understanding of Blackness and prompting a reconciliation with his roots. This new understanding of his subjectivity ultimately releases him “from the illusion that [he] hated America” (*Conversations* 4). Carter’s trajectory in Europe is also emblematic of how Switzerland highlights his sense of otherness and deepens his reflection on Black identity. Before settling in Bern Carter leaves Paris, Amsterdam, and Munich, because they were “unfriendly,”

“fearsome,” and he did not speak the language (31). However, in Switzerland he is met with the same hostility and has to confront four languages which he does not speak. The locals repeatedly ask him: “but why Switzerland? Bern of all places!” – to which Carter responds that “Switzerland is an ideal spot from which to observe not only Europe, but the entire world.” It is “the form through which I am taking a look at myself and the world at large” (63). Similarly, but from a globalized contemporary setting, Cole observes that he longs for Switzerland, “but what I long for is the feeling of being an outsider there” (Cole, “Far Away”). Just like Baldwin and Carter before him, Switzerland’s familiar strangeness helps Cole track the development of his own subjectivity as a Black man. Sixty years after his literary predecessors, he seeks to understand the present by placing it in a new relation to the past.

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